

Call to Worship:

Jesus went to the mountaintop to pray.

Jesus went into the city to heal.

Jesus walked to Samaria to extend love.

Jesus went to the water's edge to teach.

Jesus went to places of peace and connection,

but Jesus also went to the wilderness.

There is nowhere we can go

that God does not walk with us.

We are in God's house.

Let us worship Holy God.

Opening Hymn: Forty Days and Forty Nights

Call to Confession

Friends, we worship a God who doesn't keep score and doesn't hold grudges. We

worship a God who invites us into a richer faith, a deeper love, a more compassionate

existence with a million chances to try again. So let us speak truth into our lives,

asking for God's help where we need it. Let us pray the prayer of confession together.

Prayer of Confession

Holy God, when we think that expansive life is about power—

Teach us a new way.

Gracious Creator, when we think that expansive life is about material wealth—

Teach us a new way.

Gracious Author, when we think that expansive life is about control—

Teach us a new way.

Teach us to live as you live.

Teach us to love as you love.

Forgive us when we don't.

Gratefully we pray, amen.

Words of Forgiveness

Siblings in Christ, no matter how many times we mess up, no matter how far we wander,
no matter how lost we feel, God's grace is full to the brim.
It overflows in desert places.
It finds us where we are and it covers us in mercy.

Hear and believe this good news—

God's love is overflowing.

We are drenched in mercy.

Thanks be to God, amen.

Hymn: Love Divine (new Scottish hymns).

Prayer for Illumination

God of the wilderness places in our lives,
it can be hard to hear you in the desert.

It can be hard to hear you in the city,
in the midst of our calendar reminders,
rush-hour traffic, and notification alerts.

It can be hard to hear you, so we ask:
make everything quiet.

Pause the chaos.

Still the rushing.

Ease our racing thoughts.

Give us ears to hear your Word for us today
which promises that even in the desert
you are full to the brim.

We are listening.

We ache for your good news.

Gratefully we pray, amen.

Scripture Reading: Luke 4:1-13 | Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Sermon:

I wonder what you first think of when you hear of the word's wilderness or desert?

Here in Central Otago, we are the driest place on average in New Zealand. It also doesn't take too long for us to be away from any signs of habitation and to feel like we are in a wilderness of sorts.

The other desert I think of is probably not one that many of us consider. That is Antarctica. The average yearly rainfall at the south pole is just 10mm. Makes Alexandra's 340mm seem enormous by comparison. In the dry valleys of Antarctica, it is believed that they haven't seen snow or rain in some 14 million years.

Our reading from Luke is of Jesus being led into the desert for some 40 days, by the Spirit. In that space of wilderness Jesus is tempted by the diabolic one. This leading of spirit is not a unique one, throughout Luke's writings and in the book of acts we see the spirit time and time again leading people into trials, uncertainties, and times of wilderness experiences.

Through the time of wilderness experience Jesus is seen to return not broken by the experience but rather strengthened and with the power of the Spirit.

While in the wilderness Jesus is confronted by three different trials by the diabolic one.

The first asserts to Jesus that if he is the Son of God, he should transform a stone into bread. Jesus responds by quoting scripture from Deuteronomy: essentially stating that a human's life is more than its cravings. We as humans are not solely responsible for our wellbeing. As we encounter uncertainty we should lean into the spirit and into God for our provision. This is what the Israelites learnt as they wandered their wilderness experience for some 40 years. They learnt to lean into and to trust God in their uncertainty.

The second trial is when the diabolic one offered Jesus authority and fame over all the kingdoms of the inhabited world. His condition was that Jesus would worship him. Again, Jesus' response is based in scripture asserting that the Lord is the only one to be worshipped.

Jesus recognizes that if attaining fame requires becoming a servant to the Diabolic One, the cost is too high. We too can be people that seek fame and fortune. But at what cost? There was nothing that the diabolic one could offer Jesus. After all everything was already his.

The last trial perhaps arises out of Jesus' own responses by using scripture. In this case quotes from psalms are used. We see that the diabolic one weaves two psalms together to convince Jesus to throw himself off the highest point of the temple. In doing so the diabolic one is trying to put God on trial through Jesus. Jesus' response is that scripture should not be used to cast doubt on God's presence with God's people. Scripture is not to be used as the gotcha that we so often see in politics. Question time in parliament so often features questioning does the minister have confidence in... or media asking questions at press conferences so often just want a statement to create a soundbite to shape their narrative, rather than getting the full picture.

Our scripture is a reminder that God's presence is always with us, especially in the wilderness. God's spirit assists us to resist the temptations of the diabolic one and also the temptations of our broken world.

The telling of the Israelites wilderness experience of 40 years through exodus, numbers and Leviticus illuminates great hardships that they faced. So much so they considered life was better when they were enslaved. Despite their journeying through the wilderness comes to an end after the 40 years, life was not to be easy. migrations were still to be a part of their journey, and remembering who they were, and for us who we are in Christ is vitally important. Particularly as we face wilderness times. We are in many ways facing that now, firstly through the pandemic, and secondly through the decline in the world's peace. Two things that can bring much trauma, two things that can cause us to challenge who we are, and God's role in our lives. By using remembering who we are, and as we read through scripture seeing how the Israelites were reminded of who they were, can sustain us for whatever uncertainty we may face in the future.

Deuteronomy 26 serves as what we would consider an early creed or affirmation, that was recited, to help people remember who they were and who God is. How God had travelled alongside them, even amidst the turmoil and suffering.

An unforgettable element of this recitation is the role of God in their salvation and blessings. God is the one who hears their cry, acts to save them, and ensures their arrival in “a land flowing with milk and honey”. Since God played such a central role, it is only right to show reverence and celebrate God.

And finally, all of this is framed as a journey. They journey to a specific site where they remember their forefather as a vagabond. Furthermore, they emphasize that journeying to Egypt is what transformed a family into a people, and the journeys that they now take will always carry relics of the travels of their ancestors.

Thus, the people who articulate their identity through this creed are not just establishing who they are based on the past they have endured and God’s salvific role in their journey. Instead, they are also developing that journey’s relevance for their current engagement with the world.

And that is our task as we face the uncertainty of the next, wee while, yes, we will be tested. Yes, it will feel like a wilderness experience, in which not a lot may grow, yes, we may feel abandoned. We may be questioned, And yet if we draw near to the spirit of God, and if we draw near to scripture and if we remember who we are, and whose we are, we will not only persevere but come through this with greater power and hope.

Hymn: You lead us through the Wilderness

Affirmation of Faith

We believe God is love.

We believe God’s love is overflowing.

We believe Jesus is a river.

We believe that river is running toward us.

We believe the Holy Spirit is a vessel.
We believe that vessel holds mercy for you and for me.
We believe the wilderness is real.
We believe the desert is lonely.
We believe that Jesus has been there.
We know that we do not walk alone.
Even in the desert,
we are loved.
Even in the desert,
God is with us.
Even in the desert,
this love overflows.
Thanks be to God,
amen.

Prayers for Our World

Closing Hymn:

Let us hear Psalm 31, read by the people of Ukraine, some from their bunkers amidst war and suffering. Following this we will listen to Lord Have Mercy.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cBltQ-5cnO4&list=PLdlOkAj6uJuqPY0d68F7f9C6AgGwz3In-&index=11>

Closing:

As you leave our time of Worship,
may you be awestruck by the beauty of this world.
May you laugh, and may it be contagious.
May you overflow with love for those around you.
May you be unrestrained with hope and quick to point out joy.
And in all of your living, and breathing, and being,
may you find yourself full to the brim with God's Holy Spirit,
and may it change your life.
In the name of the Lover, the Beloved, and Love itself—
go in peace, full to the brim. Amen.